

1871

Victoria Begins

We celebrate in 1993 the centenary of women's suffrage in New Zealand. The many thousands of women who conducted the wide-based political campaign for the vote, although not necessarily highly educated, were for the most part eager that women should have access to a good education. The early success of the movement for women's suffrage in New Zealand, the first country to give women the vote, was matched by the early admission of women to university education. New Zealand, although not the first country in the world to admit women to universities, led the way within the British Empire. While some classes in the University of London were opened to women in 1868, they were debarred from certain classes, and degree courses were closed to them. Here in New Zealand, the University of Otago opened all its classes to women in 1871, the first university institution in either Australasia or the United Kingdom to do so; and Canterbury College followed a year later.

For a woman to embark on a university course was, however, unusual at the end of the nineteenth century. Society expected that young women would make marriage and child-rearing their life's vocation. Career aspirations and academic ambitions were considered questionable for girls and few parents wanted bluestockings for daughters. The well-to-do wanted young ladies who could play the piano, arrange flowers, sew and embroider, all useful accomplishments for the brides they hoped their daughters would soon become; the less well off wanted their girls to be able to earn a living in case they did not marry.

It was therefore only the exceptional young woman who made up her mind to attend university. We intend to tell the story of such women at one particular institution, Victoria University College, which in 1957 became Victoria University. We hope, however, not to lose sight of the other university institutions in New Zealand. Our story begins far from Wellington.

